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Back Talk

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Back Talk

Internet Smut: Is There a Problem?

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I don't really want to get into a definitional squabble. Some might say that there is no such thing as smut, just information that is perhaps offensive to one person or culture but not another. The *American Heritage Dictionary* indicates smut is "obscenity in speech or writing" or "pornography." Let's just say for the sake of conversation that in some people's minds, smut exists (no pun intended). It apparently also can be found on the Internet. I have been trying to decide if this is a problem. The parent part of me thinks there is a problem. The librarian part of me seems to require that I defend the rights of my library clientele to read whatever they want.

My 13-year-old son's school recently sent me a newsletter that indicated in a column entitled "Kids and Computers" that kids his age are likely to use the computer unsupervised and to "participate in online discussions regarding companionship, relationships or sexual activity." Well OK, maybe this is just an online version of how I learned about the birds and bees and how to get along with other people. The article, however, goes on to indicate that some experts caution that they can be exposed to "inappropriate materials, physical molestation, and harassment." All of this is what causes the parent part of me some anxiety.

The librarian part of me, however, is quick to counter with the statement that there is no inappropriate information, only possibly inappropriate uses of information. We employ the American Rifle Association mentality when defending every one's right to read. After all, since "guns don't kill people, people kill people," we should only fear people who use information wrongly and not the information itself. Since I have always worked in universities, supporting the Right to Read has been fairly easy. If fact, the issue has only come up once in my career. At a library where I previously worked, a member of the Board of Trustees sent a letter suggesting that we withdraw our microfilm copy of *Playboy*. A male stu-

dent with severe physical disabilities was wanting to read back issues of this magazine but was unable to load or advance the frames of the film himself. A female student attendant was offended when she was asked to load the film and then forward the frames every few minutes. As the social sciences librarian, I was asked to withdraw the film or defend its retention. I defended the need for the narrative parts of the magazine but not the pictures that the female student found degrading. The subscription was canceled anyway.

Let me return for a moment to the subtitle to this article: "Is There a Problem?" Maybe I am being too stuffy. Maybe my 13-year-old son should have the opportunity to read and look at smut. As I was delaying putting all this down on paper, I was reading the *New York Times* (what I would normally be doing on a Saturday morning except for

See Drinking from the Firehose, this issue, page 75, for a related discussion of the same topic.

Katina's badgering that I get my column in to her) and saw that what I thought was smut isn't really anything of the kind. At a party attended by San Francisco's Mayor, the District Attorney, the President of the Board of Supervisors and other public leaders, the entertainment was composed of a "topless mustachioed woman," "inflated plastic penises," and a finale composed of "a dominatrix with a razor blade and a whisky bottle urinating on the prostrate body of a satanic priest." (NYT, May 10, 1997). If government funds or tax deductible lobbyist funds are used to pay for such entertainment, it must be an acceptable form of activity in today's America. (Yes, I know that news reports suggest that this event for political leaders seems to have crossed the line even in San Francisco.) After all, if I want my son to grow up and become president or even a mayor of America's third great city, he must have the opportunity to submerge himself in their culture. On the other hand, maybe I should just rule the NYT off limits so he won't adopt any interesting new role models and hope he becomes an engineer.

I asked my high school age daughter if she thought there was a problem. She didn't seem to be terribly concerned unless adults, disguised as teenagers, used the Internet to seek out children for molestation or murder. She said that teenagers often pretended to be adults on chat lines. Her answer didn't do

much to ease my anxiety so I asked my college student daughter what she thought. She said that she thought that porn was too easy to find on the Net and that you sometimes happened onto it when that wasn't your intent or that students would send raunchy material to each other for the shock effect.

So, is there a problem? Do we as librarians, who are also parents or adults with the responsibility of raising tomorrow's leaders, have a conflict with our profession's Right to Read statement? What if it means the right to read and be exposed to trash and trashy people? Should we oppose filtering software in libraries in the same way as the ARA opposes mandatory trigger locks in order to prevent the unintentional firing of a pistol? If a child's life is a terrible thing to waste, what about his or her mind?

In my freshman American Government class, our teacher repeated the old phrase that I suppose is often used to explain the limits of one's civil liberties: "Where my nose begins, your freedom ends." I think one of the problems faced by our profession is deciding where our users noses begin in this new digital age. In the past when the media we stored required the user to find an item using a catalog, locate and pull the item off the shelf and then open it to read, we defended our right to collect material purchased for one patron, but offensive to another. We collected the material but we didn't make it easy for those who might potentially be offended to read it. To use the nose metaphor, we made it difficult for them to stick their noses where they didn't belong and as long as they controlled where they put their noses, their potential to not be offended was minimized. Now we have a media that makes it easy to be confronted with offensive material. Now we have a media that makes it easy for our children to read all kinds of information before they are ready, if ever. What should we do?

If we permit censorship of the Internet, what other forms of censorship might follow? But to refuse to filter what is out there when children are apt to access Internet smacks of the American Rifle Association's defense of the right to bear arms even if that leads to automatic weapons in the hands of 14-year-olds killing each other and their elders in some of our inner cities.

I discussed this column with a friend of mine who suggested librarians working with younger children will probably censor the Internet for another reason unrelated to worries about young minds: the fear of litigation. So maybe Internet Smut is a problem after all.

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